DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 412 RC 018 028

AUTHOR Theobald, Paul; Theobald, Jan
TITLE Critical Pedagogy for Rural Teachers?
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Book/Product Reviews (072)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Book Reviews; *Critical Theory; Critical Thinking; *Democratic Values; Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Role of Education; *Rural Education; *Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Empowerment

ABSTRACT

Three books represent the recent work of leading U.S. proponents of critical approaches to pedagogy: "Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education," by Peter McLaren; "Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching," edited by Ira Shor; and "Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning," by Henry A. Giroux. References to critical pedagogy imply at least four significant ideas: (1) fostering student initiative and creativity through nonauthoritarian dialogue between student and teacher; (2) promoting democracy by engaging students in the struggle for a society that lives up to its democratic ideals; (3) empowering students with the obligation to critique American society; and (4) having faith in the average intellect. Shor's book is a collection of essays written by international educators who have put into practice the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who empowered his students to lead successful voting rights movements. While intriguing, much of the book does not speak to the world of American public school teachers. McLaren's book details the ideological position of critical teachers, and contends that an increasingly undemocratic social order is supported by the schooling experience. Giroux's collection of essays portrays the role of teacher as "transformative intellectual" who educates with a bias toward freedom, justice, and equality. If there is merit in critical theory for rural educators, it is in the idea that rural students need to engage in dialogue about the powerful social forces that are shaping their lives and their futures. (SV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED329412

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY FOR RURAL TEACHERS

by
Paul Theobald

RC018028

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Paul Theobald

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Critical Pedagogy For Rural Teachers?

Peter McLaren, Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education. New York: Longman, 1989.

Ira Shor, Ed., Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1987.

Henry A. Giroux, Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning. Granby, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1988.

by Paul and Jan Theobald

What is critical pedagogy?

These books represent the recent work of three leading proponents of "critical appproaches to pedagogy" in the United States. We have reviewed these books with the intention of defining what falls under the label "critical pedagogy," and exploring the implications of this for the world of the rural school.

One central theme that nearly all critical theorists agree on is the necessity for dialogue in the learning process. With this in mind, some see a critical pedagogical tradition dating as far back as Socrates. It seems, however, other components of the critical theory position betray more recent origins. Yet the emphasis on dialogue, on allowing students a voice, is central to critical theory. In A Place Called School John Goodlad noted that less than one percent of instructional time involved discussion that "required some kind of open response involving reasoning or perhaps even an opinion from students." Critical theorists would have us reverse these percentages.

Returning to the origins of what is synonymously referred to as "critical pedagogy," "critical theory," or the "new sociology of

education," the legacy of John Dewey looms large. Dewey wrote extensively about the symbiotic relationship of public schooling and democracy. Giroux admist his "position owes a great deal to John Dewey's views on democracy." (p. xxxiii) The legacy of George Counts is also quite visible in current critical theory. Counts, the author of a 1932 text entitled Dare the School Build a New Social Order?, boldly suggested that the school was the appropriate place to engage students on the merits of the American political, economic, and social system. Once again, Giroux uses Counts to advance his critique of schools as agents that reproduce social inequities. Said Counts, "We must distinguish between that education which is for all, and that which is for the few. At present our secondary education is of the first type in theory, and of the second type in practice." (quoted in Giroux, p.186)

The most recent player in the historical development of critical theory, however, is the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. Back in the 1950s Freire began a project to promote literacy in the Brazilian countryside. He was so effective that his students led successful movements designed to help them obtain the vote and a voice in the political process. As a result of his successes, Freire was exiled from Brazil by the military government in 1964. His most famous work is Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) where he outlined his philosophy of teaching and learning.

Freire believes that teachers cannot remain neutral, that they must teach with conviction that which they believe. Once again, dialogue is central to Freire's pedagogy. "Learners enter into the process of learning not by acquiring facts, but by constructing

their reality in social exchange with others." Like Counts, Freire views schooling as a place where "actions and decisions" ought to be formulated in order that people "gain control over their lives." (Shor, p.34)

A final commonality among critical pedagogues appears to be unbounded faith in the average intellect. Barring the rare case of mental illness, critical theorists believe all of America's school kids are capable of achieving far more than they currently do. They point out, persuasively, that no one has ever correlated rate of learning with capacity for learning, though it remains an almost tacit assumption among educators that those who learn quick can necessarily learn more. As well, critical theorists are generally very skeptical about standardized achievement tests and concur with John Dewey when he wrote in 1922, "The current reception of the results of mental testing prove the extent to which we are given to judging and treating individuals not as individuals but as creatures of a class."

To summarize, references to critical pedagogy will imply at least four significant ideas. The first is that the pedagogy of teacher talk, bland texts, and short answer tests stifles individual initiative and creativity in schools. To alleviate this problem critical pedagogues promote nonauthoritarian dialogue, dialogue which at times puts the teacher in the role of learner and learners in the role of teachers.

The second idea is that the school is the place to promote discussion of what is and what is not inherently democratic. Critical pedagogues would have us take seriously the mission of

educating a citizenry, in Jefferson's words, capable of enabling "every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom." The idea here is to promote democracy by continually engaging students in a struggle for a society that lives up to democratic standards of libert, justice, and equality.

The third idea flows naturally from the second. That is, schools must empower students with the obligation to critique American society. This is in keeping with the Deweyan notion that such critical questioning is a defining characteristic of a democratic nation. Students should actively work at setting democratic standards and then just as actively critique the extent to which American society measures up to them.

The last common element in critical pedagogy is derived from the others although the connection is not readily apparent. Faith in the average intellect, distrust of standardized intelligence measures, rejection of ability grouping and tracking; all of these are part of the partisan, value-laden commitment to teaching that promotes equality, liberty, and justice. Critical pedagogues categorically reject the notion that teachers can be value-neutral and effectively teach.

The books

Ira Shor's book is a collection of essays written by national and international educators who have put Freirean pedagogy into practice. The unifying theme to all of the essays is that education is place "in the immediate context of students and the larger context of society." (p.2) While Shor's opening essay on "Educating the Educators" is illuminating and relatively easily

read, the same cannot be said for all of the other essays. Although intriguing from an intellectual standpoint, much of the book, though it is subtitled "A Sourceboook for Liberatory Teaching," did not speak to the world of American public school teachers. The exceptions are a short essay by Nancy Zimmet who wrote about teaching reading in a suburb of Boston and Marilyn Frankenstein's essay on "Critical Mathematics Education."

Peter McLaren's Life in Schools is easilly the most readable volume of the three. He outlines in detail the ideological position of those who claim to be critical teachers. He goes to great lengths to point out school-related and societal inequities that indicate that "we inhabit a perilous course in history in which democracy is in retreat." (p.3) While we are usually suspicious of such grand generalizations, the case McLaren presents is unnerving. His portrayal of what he sees as a growing undemocratic trend is clearly stated, well documented, difficult to refute, and terribly depressing. Enveloped by introductory and concluding analysis in the book are 125 pages of journal entries that tell the story of McLaren's first year teaching inner-city Toronto fifth and sixth graders.

Everything about the school and the lives of his students suggests consistency between a growing undemocratic social order and the schooling experience that seemingly plays its part to that end. McLaren's concluding analysis discusses the "radical" notion of the "social construction of knowledge." That is, he and other critical theorists believe that groups in society work out answers to the question: what knowledge is of most worth? And those who

are disenfranchised from the knowledge construction process, whether by race, class, or gender, fare less well in our society (and in our schools) than those who are not.

Teachers as Intellectuals is a collection of Giroux's essays that speak to the issue of allowing teachers to take steps to reclaim some of the skills and decision-making power lost to the packagers of "teacher-proof" curricula, standardized test-makers, and centralized educational authorities. Giroux's message is surprisingly simple. He sees the role of teacher in the public school as most correctly being what he refers to as "transformative intellectuals."

Transformative intellectuals engage in what Giroux calls "cultural politics." That is, teachers as intellectuals should be partisan, they should educate with a bias toward freedom, justice, and equality. For Giroux this entails recognizing the inequities perpetuated by the current systenm wherein teachers are "deskilled" and bereft of decision-making power. Giroux believes teachers must actively struggle against these constraints. He uses the phrase "servants of the empire" for teachers who do not challenge the ability grouping, standardized testing, and tracking that he claims serve to solidify and reproduce social divisions. Teachers as intellectuals, on the other hand, work at breaking down these divisions. Giroux devotes a chapter to an example of how a history class might seek to engage students in dialogue and give them a way to understand the circumstances that produced our current societal arrangement.

Giroux, like McLaren and Shor, leans heavily on the philosophy

of Paulo Freire. If Freire can legitimately be called the "founder of critical pedagogy," then critical pedagogy was born in the countryside. In the United States, it is largely thought of in urban terms. Even in Brazil, after initial successes with rural peasants, Freire's followers moved quickly to big-city slums. Diversity and pluralism is more common in large cities. The manifestations of an inequitable social and economic order is apparent there for any who care to look.

Relevance for rural educators

What is happening to rural America, however, is less apparent and less visible. If we think seriously about the claims of critical theorists we have to conclude that sometimes, even in largely homogeneous farming communities, there are social forces exuding powerful influences on the lives of rural people. Not all of these can be said to be democratic. Technological advances hasten the consolidation of farms causing steady rural depopulation. Quality hospital and health care is increasingly out of reach for rural people. Community schools are forced to shut down.

It seems to us that if there is merit in critical theory for rural educators, it is in the idea that rural students as rural residents need to engage in dialogue about the forces that are shaping their lives and their futures. McLaren asks, "Could it be that the most dangerous enemies of America are the gods of expansion, progress, and accumulation?" (p.3) He has a good point. The answer to the question, "What has changed rural America most in the last twenty years?", is certainly best answered by reference to

growth in America's agriimplement and agrichemical industries. They have destroyed rural communities, closed hospitals and schools, and are currently doing severe damage to the rural environment. Is it necessary? Or is it only necessary for agribusiness profits?

We see a great deal of good in a pedagogical approach that allows rural students to articulate the democratic parameters within which agribusiness may impinge upon their lives. If our students determine that agribusiness has crossed over those parameters and is actively touching the lives of rural residents in an undemocratic way, then perhaps we will have become the "transformative intellectuals" Giroux would like to see us become. Perhaps we will be educating a generation of rural residents who will put life back in rural communities keeping forces that perpetuate social and economic inequity at bay.